Leading to Grow

How a Programme Delivered by Business Schools to Help Micro-Businesses To Adopt Productivity-Raising Digital Technologies Pivoted to Provide Emergency Business Advice during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Programme Delivered by Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS)

Funded by BEIS through Round 2 of "Business Basics Fund"

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Executive Summary

Leading to Grow (LtG) was a programme involving 15 business schools within English universities that was intended to support micro-businesses to understand the potential of digital technologies to improve their productivity. LtG was an experiment, delivered as a randomised controlled trial (RCT), to test the impact of having individualised help from an experienced business professional (termed here, Entrepreneur-in-Residence – EiR) in addressing any barriers within microbusinesses to diagnosing digital technology needs and committing to subsequent implementation.

The programme was funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) as a project funded by its Business Basics programme (2018-2022). The Business Basics programme was designed to test innovative ways of encouraging small and medium sized enterprises to adopt existing technologies and management practices to improve their productivity (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/business-basics-programme).

Projects were selected under the Programme following open competitions and were delivered in partnership with Innovate UK and the Innovation Growth Lab at Nesta. LtG was one of 12 projects selected in Round 2 of Business Basics, from 300 applicants, and was funded by a share of £2m from the Business Basics Fund.

LtG was conceived, submitted and delivered by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) - https://charteredabs.org. The university business schools participating in LtG were both affiliated to CABS as members and accredited with the Small Business Charter (http://smallbusinesscharter.org).

After provisional notification of success in the competition in July 2019, implementation of the proposal started in August 2019. Marketing of LtG to micro-businesses (1 to 9 employees) started in November 2019, with their attendance at the first baseline workshops commencing from February 2020. These workshops explained the potential of digital technologies to improve business performance, and served as the sample population from which the RCT would then allocate a proportion of participants to the treatment intervention of further work with an EiR.

LtG as an RCT was terminated on 18th March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic caused huge upheaval, requiring people to avoid all unnecessary social contact and shutting down large sectors of the economy.

LtG's capacity for providing business advice through the 33 EIRs recruited was used through June, July and August 2020 to deliver an emergency Covid-response to businesses to help with survival planning, strategizing, identification of market opportunity and sources of further help. Of 277 businesses attending the baseline workshop, and a further 34 business that had been in the pipeline to attend, over the summer 195 businesses were assisted with help from the EiRs. Feedback from those businesses was highly positive.

Introduction

Context

This planned randomised control trial (RCT) was conceived and deployed prior to the RNA of a coronavirus mutating into what became known as Covid-19, with the consequential devastating impact that it would have on the human race. The world has changed so fundamentally because of Covid-19 that it makes little sense to write a complete retrospective account of what was done and why in this programme. In fact, it would be almost impossible to do so, since we do not yet have the perspective from a post-Covid-19 world. At the point of writing, there was the world before Covid, and experience of a world during Covid.

Instead, this report explains a programme to help microbusinesses from an understanding of the world as it existed at that time. It uses contemporary documents to explain the evidence and arguments that were presented to design the programme, even though it is recognised that, for many businesses, the world is unlikely to return to the way it was.

Policy problem

Prior to the pandemic, the chronic stagnation in productivity growth since the Great Recession of 2008 was the most pressing economic problem impacting on future prosperity. This stagnation in productivity growth was true for all sizes of businesses.

Micro-businesses (1-9 employees) are at inevitable risk of attracting little policy attention: they are after all, and by definition, relatively small. However, their modest contribution individually is multiplied by their vast but largely invisible prevalence. At the start of 2020, there were 1.157 million micro-businesses in the UK (source: Business Population Estimates 2020, BEIS) – 81.9% of all employing businesses. They employed 4.196 million people (18.4% of all private-sector employees) and contributed £615Bn of turnover (or £1 in every £6.50 of turnover from all employing firms).

This is a huge collective economic contribution from these tiny businesses, yet their fragmented and dispersed nature creates challenges and barriers to their policy engagement. Whereas large businesses often have the resources to advocate with policymakers, in order to generate an environment that is supportive to their growth, far less is known about smaller businesses and their capacity to adopt productivity improvements or to have wider benefits to the businesses ecosystems within which they operate.

Research background

Previous research by BIS on micro-businesses has investigated the barriers identified to owners to developing their businesses (see: *Understanding Growth in Micro-businesses.* 2013. BIS Research Report 114. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/micro-businesses-understanding-growth).

First, that research identified that the vast majority of employing micro-businesses (87% of 657 businesses) identified one or more constraints that prevented the business growing to its full potential. Many of these constraints could be viewed as market failures that hinder the collective economic potential of micro-businesses.

Second, the research identified three broad archetypes of constraint: capacity, vision, and market. Under half of micro-businesses were held back by external market constraints (45%). Much more common were vision constraints (72%) and capacity constraints (67%). Two key findings were that business owners often identified themselves as being multiply constrained in growing their business, and that often these constraints were internal to the business rather than external or environmental. Those internal barriers were often rooted in the mindset of the owner, their appetite for growth and a set of beliefs that were based on myths, misperceptions and misinformation.

Third, the report "*highlight[ed] limits to the effectiveness of initiatives that focus on specific factors*" because most micro-businesses identified multiple constraints to growth. Instead it identified that "*these findings suggest that effective interventions need to be holistic and multi-dimensional. Smaller businesses in particular require such compound interventions*."

Finally, from focus groups, the research identified a set of myths held by micro-business owners holding them back from improving their businesses: examples include that growth during a recission is impossible, banks would never lend to businesses like theirs, or that hiring staff is too complex and/or risky. The report concluded that, "*The myths overlap to a certain extent and are underpinned by a reluctance to plan, strategise or develop the business and a focus on working <u>in</u> rather than <u>on</u> the business*".

Trial Justification

This trial was intended to test the extent to which these multi-dimensional constraints to growth, held by the owners of micro-businesses, could be eroded or overcome, so they could better express and actualise the growth intentions within the businesses. In simple terms, it was about removing whatever it is that is holding the businesses back from taking growth-related actions.

The growth-related actions considered within this planned trial related to the deployment of digital and web-based technologies. Many businesses face barriers to digital technology adoption. Evidence suggested that for around 36% of small businesses, a barrier to doing more business online was "not being sure what the appropriate technologies are to invest in" (Source: UK Business Digital Index 2019 report by Lloyds Bank)

We envisaged three mechanisms for eroding the barriers to expression of growth-related behaviours:

1) Normalising having a growth ambition, through dialogue and interaction with a learning-set of motivated peer businesses (changing culture through immersion and reflection).

2) Expert, high-quality guidance of an 'Entrepreneur in Residence' (EiR) backed by the 'brand credibility' of a University business school.

3) Flexible, tailored and responsive advice that would be individually personalised to understand the business owner, their business and the barriers it faced.

Through these three mechanisms, this trial sought to test the economic impact of accessible, individualised, external, expert and impartial advice for business owners to appraise anew how they could improve their business and could solve any inhibiters to taking action.

Micro-businesses are geographically diverse and a key component of this trial justification was to test the extent to which a standardised intervention could be delivered in multiple sites across the country. Ultimately, if policy interventions are going to have a meaningful economic impact they need to have the potential to be delivered far-and-wide and to a sizable proportion of the eligible target business population. This trial hoped to test some of the delivery and scalability challenges by working through 15 University business schools. A more locally confined trial would provide no insights into whether the trial delivery and outcomes could be generalised into novel contexts.

Main Research Question

The RCT sought to test whether personalised, tailored support from a business expert – the Entrepreneur in Residence (EiR) – to the business owner could sufficiently reduce the perceived constraints to growth, such that more growth-related intent and growth-related behaviours were exhibited by those businesses. By saving time and labour, improvements in speed, accuracy and efficiency were anticipated over the longer-term. Ultimately, this improves productivity. This is the pattern observed elsewhere: the Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) showed higher sales per employee for micro-businesses that adopted a range of digital technologies including deploying cloud-based computing, a CRM system, e-commerce, web-based accounting software and computer aided design.

Who was being compared?

In order to recruit micro-businesses into the RCT, **all micro-businesses** were to receive a group session at their local business school (the "**baseline workshop**") to expose the possibilities from adopting digital and web-based technologies and their potential to improve business performance. Often businesses 'don't know what they don't know', so simply from exposure to case studies and evidence of impact this might impart ideas for new practices and transformation that could be applied in the audience businesses. These were intended to be face-to-face so that businesses with a range of experiences and ambitions could collectively contribute to rich and dynamic exchanges. Experience from delivery of previous programmes to SMEs had shown opportunity for exchange and interplay made for much more impactful and deeper absorption oof the messages being communicated.

The comparison part of the RCT should have come after the baseline workshop, with some micro-businesses going onto receive a **treatment of 4 hours of tailored 1-2-1 diagnosis**, advice and action planning from the EiR. The EiRs were experienced business leaders with whom the business schools had established relationships from previous qualifications (e.g. MBA), advice and coaching programmes. Rather than consultants recruited solely for the programme , the EiRs were a known quantity for the business schools who, in addition to providing sound advice, the schools knew could be used as ambassadors for both the LtG programme and their institution.

The alternative route was the **control group, who received no more help** in understanding how to interpret what they had heard in the baseline workshops to their own business.

The inherent assumption was that for most businesses owners the barriers to change are more stubborn than can be removed by simply attending one seminar or workshop. The RCT compared the added benefit of investing in a tailored, individual diagnostic assessment in overcoming those barriers.

After working with an EiR, the plan was that treatment businesses would all be invited to a second face-to-face group session (**the follow-up workshop**) to boost commitment within those businesses to adopt change in practice, and to tackle any 'lingering doubts'. Enabled by being in the same physical space, it was envisaged that the opportunity to hear how other businesses were positively responding with intent to change would have beneficial peer-to-peer effects that would help normalise the taking of action to implement new business practices or procedures.

What is being compared?

Given that outcomes would only be gathered within the first 3-months after the intervention, at best, only intermediate outcome measures of attitude and behaviour change would have been observable before the end of the trial. What the trial would measure was how successful was the EiR treatment in raising either <u>commitment</u> to implement one or more of the digital and web-based technologies explained, or <u>actual implementation</u> and business activity change.

What is the outcome to be changed?

Success for the experiment would be a statistically significant increase in the proportion of micro-businesses either having adopted or intended to adopt one or more of the named digital and web-based technologies and timed since participation in the trial.

The Impact of Covid

Plans for the trial were interrupted by the unfolding impact of Covid-19 in the UK on its people and economy. Although the machinery for the trial was put in place, including randomisation of participating businesses and availability of expert EiRs to work with microbusinesses in the treatment group, the RCT was abandoned part way through the delivery of baseline workshops. In its place, the trial infrastructure was used to connect the participating businesses with the offer of advice and help from the schools' EiRs.

Method

Participants

The intention of the trial was that each Business School would recruit 50 eligible micro-businesses to participate in their baseline workshops. With 15 business schools participating in the programme, that should have contributed a population of 750 micro-businesses.

Eligibility

The micro-businesses that were eligible to participate had to:

- Be **registered businesses** with either a Companies House registration, PAYE or VAT number.
- Declare that the business had been trading continuously for at least the **last three years**.
- Had between **1 and 9 paid employees** of the businesses. An employee is a person working within the business under a contract of employment in return for a wage or salary.
- Be **England-based** for head office, purposes and not foreign-owned subsidiaries.
- Have **no participation on a business improvement programme** with a Business School within the last 12 months, at time of attending first workshop.

In addition, the participant from the business had to be both:

- the business owner (or person responsible for decision running the business – including, strategy, finance and operations), and
- committed in wanting to take action to grow the business.

The rationale for these eligibility criteria was to maximise likely impact and minimise sample attrition.

- ***Business longevity*** – Younger businesses have lower year-on-year survival rates. By only selecting businesses that are at least 3 years old, the intention was to avoid the highest business mortality rates and minimise this source of sample attrition.
- ***Employing businesses*** – non-employing businesses were excluded, because having succeeded in becoming an employing business is a useful marker of the business having succeeded in surviving an important growth-related step. It provides some reassurance that the capability exists within the micro-business to withstand the day-to-day challenges that might arise from implementing further growth-related activities (such as those recommended through programme treatment).
- ***UK-based*** – UK-based businesses were targeted since the intervention was funded by the UK government. Eligibility included UK businesses that were not-for-profit but were still motivated to increase revenues and outputs.

- *No recent participation with business schools* – This criterion was included to reduce contamination and introduce some isolation between the impacts of this programme and any late-effects of any other activities the businesses may have previously been involved with. Ideally, this exclusion would have extended more widely to business development activities from any source (e.g. LEPs, Growth Hubs, EU programmes) but was not applied because of concerns about the ability to verify previous support.

Identification of participants – Marketing and Recruitment

Business schools were tasked with marketing and managing the recruitment themselves. They also were responsible for conducting eligibility checks and collation of the baseline data. The rationale for this was that they were best placed to know their local businesses and the institutional frameworks connected to their local businesses (e.g. Chambers of Commerce, LEPs, Growth Hubs).

CABS marketed the LtG programme nationally, through their website and national business organisations. A dozen articles were written and publicised through the trade press (online and print media.) Businesses whose interest was sparked through this marketing channel were referred directly to the relevant business school for their location, without engaging CABS as a post-box. For this reason, it is unknown which marketing approaches were most effective for what sorts of microbusiness.

Each school was allocated about £4000 to market the programme. Recruitment of sufficient micro-businesses by each business school was part of their contractual requirements with CABS.

Interested businesses typically signed up for baseline workshops online, using event booking apps, such as Eventbrite. Leads generated from CABS were passed onto the business school covering the location in which the business operated.

Numbers of businesses recruited

Prior to starting recruitment business schools had been confident of being able to recruit the required number of businesses within the required timeframe.

The reality of recruitment proved rather more challenging than most business schools anticipated; even prior to the challenges created by the Covid pandemic.

Three main issues defined the number of businesses recruited by each school

1) **Ability of business schools to reach into new segments of the local business population**. An eligibility criterion was that the microbusinesses had not participated on a business improvement programme with a business school within the last 12 months at time of attending first workshop. The stock of local businesses that business schools already knew tended to be those businesses that had already received some sort of recent intervention from the school. All such businesses were ineligible for Leading to Grow. Not all schools were equally nimble in being able to quickly open up channels to new business audiences.

   Additionally, some schools reported the trading requirement of at least three years excluded many contacts. These were recent entrepreneurs having interest to learn how to succeed with a new venture. Whilst relaxing that requirement would have made recruitment easier for the business schools, these microbusinesses were not the target audience of the programme.

2) **Converting sign-up for the baseline workshop into attendance.** The working assumption had been that around one quarter of businesses that signed up for the baseline workshop would fail to attend. It was recognised that the physical presence of business leaders for half a day (4hrs) would not always fit with individuals' diary commitments. Hence, in order to meet the 750 target number of attendees, it was anticipated that 1000 micro-businesses would be needed to sign-up. The schools were advised to over-recruit on this order of magnitude, although there was concern from the schools not to sign-up more businesses than could be accommodated on the programme because the funding was fixed and they did not wish to risk turning away 'excess' businesses because of potential reputational damage.

   In reality, even before the impact of Covid, several schools had drop-out rates, from signing up to actual attendance in the workshop, of over 50%. It is unclear how much those rates could have been reduced, since all schools carefully managed their sign-ups through phone calls and email reminders. However, from discussion with the schools, those that managed this most actively appeared to have lower non-attendance rates. A difficulty noted by schools was that the level of commitment required to sign-up was low, since there was no cost to attendance or penalty for failing to attend.

3) **Ineligible businesses attending the baseline workshop.** Despite businesses self-certifying their eligibility for the LtG programme prior to workshop attendance, the level of businesses ineligible businesses was higher than expected. Examples from two workshops were 10 of 35 and 5 of 13 attendees being ineligible. The main reasons for ineligibility were businesses trading for less than 3 years or not having any employees (i.e. sole traders). This problem may be reduced by either checking sign-ups manually by the schools or reminding sign-ups that their eligibility will be checked, perhaps as part of the process of managing pre-attendance.

Baseline Workshops

Pooling Resources

Several of the business schools participating in LtG operate in the same city region: for example, University of Birmingham and Aston University schools both operate in Birmingham; University of Leicester and de Montfort University in Leicester; Kingston University and London Metropolitan schools in London; Manchester Metropolitan and Salford University schools in Manchester; University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University schools in Sheffield. To differing extents these five pairs of schools worked together on recruitment, provision of baseline workshops and, later, the support from Entrepreneurs-in-Residence.

The Birmingham, London and Manchester schools worked most closely together, to such an extent that participating businesses would likely be unable to distinguish the business school under which they were participating.

Number of Sessions

The working assumption in the funding model was that the cohort of 50 participating businesses per school would come from attendance at two workshops. It was considered that a face-to-face workshop of around 25 people would be the ideal size to give the right balance on audience engagement and diversity of business interests and experience of digital technologies. The business schools each received around £6000 to deliver their baseline workshop (which against the intended recruitment equates to about £120 per microbusiness).

As a consequence of both the difficulty in reaching eligible businesses and the lower than anticipated rate of attendance, most schools made plans to deliver more than two baseline workshops each. No further funding was provided for delivering these additional workshops. If the trial had been able to follow the intended process, this would have created some extension to the recruitment period in order of several weeks in order to achieve much of the intended population size of participants.

Timing of delivery

It was planned that baseline workshops would be conducted over February and March 2020. Table 1 (below) presents a snapshot on dates and participation at the workshops of different business schools.

For four weeks, baseline workshops were delivered face-to-face. The first workshop was held on 4th February 2020 by Leicester Castle Management School (de Montfort University).

By 6th March 2020, business schools were reporting at the LtG programme steering group that conducting face-to-face gatherings of businesses on University premises was becoming untenable because of the emerging Covid-19 pandemic. The response to this situation is described later.

Workshop Delivery

The content of the workshops is presented in Appendix 1. In addition to including opportunity to explain the LtG programme, its structure as a randomised control trial, and to collect baseline data, the format of the workshop followed the 'business canvas model', which is widely used within management schools.

Informal feedback on all the workshops was extremely positive from the vast majority of participating businesses, citing that they were informative and motivating. The half days sessions were all held during the working week (Monday to Friday) and the working day (either morning or afternoon). A few businesses expressed that an evening or weekend scheduling would have been preferable to minimise time lost away from the business. Whether it would have been feasible to run workshops with sufficient attendance at these times was not fully explored.

Table 1 – Dates of baseline workshops from a snapshot taken on 6th March 2020, with eligible attendance numbers (where reported)
The last face-to-face workshop was delivered on 10th March, with later workshops delivered digitally via webinar.

SCHOOL	Workshop 1 Date	Attended workshop	Workshop 2 Date	Attended workshop	Workshop 3 Date	Attended workshop	Workshop 4 Date	Attended workshop	Workshop 5 Date	Attended workshop	Total Registered	EiR/ Control
Aston/ Birmingham	18th Feb (PM)		25th Feb (PM)		26th Feb (AM)	6 (from both workshops)	5th March (AM)	20	30th/31st March		26	
Coventry	21st Feb		28th Feb		4th March							
De Montfort	4th Feb		25th Feb	12 (38 prospects over to workshop)	23rd March						12	
Kingston	24th Mar		26th Mar									
Leeds Beckett	3rd March	7 (28 registered/12 attended/ 5 ineligible)	26th March								7	
Leicester	6th Feb	8 (48 signed up to prog/ 28 signed for workshop)	20th Feb (PM)	10	20th March	(3 signed up)	30th March				18	
London Metropolitan	25th Mar (am)											
Manc Met/ Salford	2nd March	25 (69 EOIs/ 10 ineligible)	5th March	20							45	28 EiR / 17 Control
Northumbria	25th Feb	11	3rd March	16	10th March	(6 registered)	TBC				27	
Nottingham Trent	20th Feb (AM)	4 (13 signed up)	6th March (AM)		11th March		27th March				4	
Sheffield Business School	3rd March		5th March	12 (22 registered/ 12 attend 2 workshops)							12	
Sheffield Univ Management	17th Feb	16	21st Feb	33							49	30 EiR/ 19 Control
Staffordshire	3rd March (PM)		18th Mar (am)									
Total											200	

The **end of the baseline workshop** explained next steps in the trial and gave the opportunity for businesses to opt out of further participation in the trial, if what they had heard so far didn't fit their business needs. This was important so that businesses did not enter the randomisation if they were not intending to continue participating. Informal feedback suggested business owners were accepting of the random selection for the treatment intervention. Reasons for this may be that the nature of the programme was explained in the written information sent prior to attendance and a 'lines to take' script was prepared for workshop leaders to deal with any questions raised (e.g. that although we hoped the help of the EIR would help those businesses receiving it we had no firm evidence that it gave any value whatsoever, and hence the evaluation).

A few businesses did not attend the whole baseline workshop, for one of two reasons: they realised they weren't eligible for further support within the programme, or they left part way through to respond to an urgent business issue. Only one business pro-actively opted out of further participation in the LtG programme: they thought the focus of the programme was commendable, but the business was already an advanced user of digital technology and was looking for some highly technical, sector-specific support that the programme would be unlikely to be able to provide.

Intended Next Stages

The intention was that baseline workshop participants would then be randomised in a 3:2 ratio with 60% receiving the treatment intervention of individual support, advice and coaching from an 'Entrepreneur-in-Residence' (EiR), while the other participants formed the control group with no further support. The intended plan for the rest of the trial is given in Appendix 2.

As planned, participants were randomly allocated to treatment and control groups after each baseline workshop by the trial manager, using the randomisation sequence provided by the evaluator. In those business schools that recruited early, the participating businesses were notified of the next steps and, for those in the treatment group, were contacted by an EiR. However, wider events prevented the continuation of the trial methodology.

Impact of Covid on Delivery

The first UK death from Covid-19 was reported on Thursday 5th March 2020. By then, the impending pandemic was already causing difficulty in conducting face-to-face workshops for at least three reasons:

- Business disruption – Leaders of micro-businesses were already switching more attention away from long-term technology investments and towards immediate business operations concerns. For example,
    - the impact on demand and changing consumer behaviour,
    - Disruption to supply chains
    - Disruption to trade, both on international connectivity with travel embargoes and domestically with government advice impacting on ability to conduct business.

- Closing Universities – Business schools, being part of Universities, are governed by the same rules covering their wider University. These were closing down their workspaces and venues, with staff moving to working at home and delivering student learning online. The meeting rooms within University that were planned for the baseline workshops were becoming inaccessible. (Later, these closures would make getting access to the evaluation data held in University offices problematic in some schools.)
- Moral, ethical and reputational considerations. Even if alternative venues away from Universities had been located, the wisdom of encouraging lengthy gatherings indoors of large numbers of people, who would never have otherwise been in close proximity to one another, was considered suspect.

The funders were notified informally that it would not be possible to conduct the trial as planned on Tuesday 10th March 2020. Although contingency plans were enacted and delivery moved from face-to-face to an online version for a time, the growing magnitude of the Covid pandemic and the impacts that this was having on society, the economy and businesses meant that very quickly it became impractical to continue the programme.

The following week, on Wednesday 18th March, the Chief Exec of CABS – as the funding holder – wrote to the funder notifying that the LtG programme was terminating, and requested that the funding available for the programme was used to support the businesses engaged within the programme to respond to the challenges created by the growing global pandemic using the expertise of the Entrepreneurs in Residence. On that same day, UK Covid-19 deaths exceeded 100 and the Bank of England governor said of the wider economic situation, "*It's obviously an emergency. I think we're living in completely unparalleled times... It's going to be a very big downturn – we know that*." Arguably, the UK was already in its first Covid 'lockdown' by then[1].

Honouring the microbusinesses that had already signed-up for LtG, the remaining baseline workshops that were scheduled for delivery in March were conducted online. No baseline workshops were conducted after March. Recruitment activity ended when the programme was terminated.

Activities planned to respond to the lower attendance rates were abandoned, including plans for business schools to schedule further baseline workshops in order to get closer to the requested total attendance of 50 microbusinesses per business school.

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[1] *"The 16th of March is the day that I came to this House and said that all unnecessary social contact should cease. That is precisely when the lockdown was started."*

Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, 16 JULY 2020.

Leading to Grow Refocus

There was no easing of Covid lockdown restrictions until 13th May 2020. During that time it was decided that the LtG project could be transformed to serve the emerging needs of the businesses already registered with the 15 business schools. It provided a 'listening exercise' led by the Entrepreneurs in Residence (EiRs) to serve two purposes; first, to provide direct advice and support to the businesses on the challenges and issues they were facing, and second, to provide important intelligence on the immediate challenges and issues facing micro-businesses to BEIS and a commentary on the effectiveness of support measures announced by Government.

Research Objectives

Overall, the dual focus was on **understanding and communicating the unfolding immediate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on microbusinesses**, alongside **providing meaningful advice and coaching** to help those microbusinesses to survive and weather the pandemic in as good a shape as possible. Given the difficulty highlighted earlier in identifying and hearing from SMEs, the intention was to use those micro-businesses already engaged with the LtG programme as an identified section of the population to give voice to how microbusinesses were responding to the Covid-19 crisis.

Methodology of Re-focussed LtG

The eligible population for the re-focussed programme included all those businesses that had expressed an interest in the original Leading to Grow programme prior to it being terminated in March (see table 2 below). This includes those businesses that attended a baseline workshop and those who had registered but not attended a baseline workshop. Those non-attenders included those who did not get to attend a workshop before the later workshop dates were cancelled, those who had accepted an invitation but failed to attend, and also some businesses that were found to be ineligible for the programme (usually because they had received previous support from a school or hadn't been trading for 3+ years).

Table 2 - numbers of businesses in scope for support through Covid-19 response

SCHOOL	Businesses that Completed Workshop	Expression of interest (eligible)	EOI but ineligible (or school haven't contacted yet to check)	Total businesses
Aston	26	34	46	106
Birmingham (same as Aston)	as above	as above	as above	as above
Leicester Castle (DMU)	13	24	-	37
Leicester	28	26	14	68
Kingston	17	30	-	47
Northumbria	30	-	28	58
Coventry	8	16	-	24
London Met	9	32	-	41
Sheffield Hallam	12	21	-	33
Staffordshire	8	19	5	32

Leeds Beckett	12	18	-	30
Sheffield Uni Management	49	17	5	71
Nottingham Trent	20	18	-	38
Salford	45	60	-	105
Manc Met (same as Salford)	as above	as above	as above	as above
Total	**277**	**315**	**98**	**690**

From this population of businesses, support was offered by the schools from one of their 'Entrepreneurs-in-Residence' (EiRs). The model was to offer each business welcoming advice and support with two or three individualised sessions. Rather than face-to-face meetings, these were either via a video conferencing application (Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout or Microsoft Teams) or the telephone.

EiR Engagements

The original LtG programme had sufficient funding to be able to pay for 25 EiR engagements of up to 4 hours each for each of the 15 participating business school. The time could be used flexibly according to what suited the business and EiR. A theoretical maximum of 375 (= 15 x 25) businesses could be supported using the available funding. Funded on a per engagement basis, the cost of on EiR working with each business was about £400, which included the 4-hours of direct 1-2-1 time with the microbusiness, all preparation time before and after, and provision of data and information requests for evaluation and accountability purposes.

Given the finite EiR capacity per business school a tiered approach was taken in making the offer, starting with those businesses already allocated to the EiR treatment group, then the EiR control group, followed by any other attendees of baseline workshops, before finally widening out to those that had expressed an interest in attending a workshop.

This meant that different schools worked with slightly different cohorts. Sheffield University Management School had already allocated its treatment group to EiRs before the impact of cohort stopped the programme, so they only offered the EiR support to this first tier of businesses only. Other schools that had recruited less strongly had more capacity to offer to subsequent priority tiers.

Detailed interviews were conducted by the EiRs, who used a semi-structured interview schedule to gather key information on the issues being faced by microbusinesses through the pandemic. The remainder of the time with the EiR was used to action plan survival tactics and exploit any opportunities arising from the upheaval created by the pandemic.

There were also opportunities available for some of the supported businesses to join webinar sessions delivered by the different business schools, including a final session of reflections and learning points to share the learning and experiences between them of the response and plans made by other participating businesses.

Final Workshop

Once all the EiR sessions had been completed, and echoing the original LtG design, a final workshop was offered to all those businesses that took up the EiR support. The workshop was repeated three times (1 December 2020 am, 1 Dec pm and 2 Dec pm) and those supported microbusinesses were able to sign up to the workshop whose timing was most convenient for them. The workshops were publicised through the business schools to those businesses that had received EiR support from 13th November through a flyer explaining the content and giving sign-up details.

The workshop was titled “Strategic Responses to a Crisis” and covered a slide presentation recap of models the businesses could use themselves to assess and better understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in their business; to strategise for business resilience in the short and longer term; how to apply the business innovation model; and essential facets of business action planning. It ended with a group discussion of reflections from the support that the businesses had through the programme and future needs and intentions.

This was an informal session and quantitative data for the evaluation wasn’t collected. The final workshop had originally been planned for face-to-face delivery, and the switch to an online webinar format impacted on both the number of businesses attending and the richness of the conversations that could be stimulated between businesses.

Although only a minority of business attended, the responses of the businesses reinforced that they had found the EiR sessions extremely valuable. In terms of planning for the future, it was difficult to gain a reliable sense of orientation towards resilience and innovation given the format of delivery, and the timing at the start of another rising wave of cases in the UK of the Covid pandemic.

Results

Baseline Survey

By the time the original LtG programme was terminated, 277 businesses had completed the baseline workshop. This includes the workshops that were delivered face-to-face and those workshops that had been scheduled but needed to be moved online, due to the pandemic (see table 3). In addition, baseline data was collected for around 34 more businesses that had already expressed intentions to join the programme but weren't able to attend a workshop (often because later workshops needed to be cancelled). These additional businesses were included as eligible for support from EiRs, bringing the total to 311 businesses.

For face-to-face workshops the data was completed on paper and collected up within the workshop. This was administered electronically when workshops shifted to online delivery. For these workshops collection of data was less complete, due to the loss of leverage on a physically captive audience. In addition some paper-based records could not be recovered because they were stored securely in University offices that remained closed and inaccessible throughout the pandemic.

Data is missing from some business schools including all nine businesses from London Metropolitan, eight from Leeds Beckett, three from Coventry and two from Leicester (22 in total). Hence, the dataset on individual businesses has 289 cases.

The breakdown of the data by business school is shown below (table 3). Schools in three areas worked together in either hosting the LtG baseline workshops and/or co-ordinating the EiR delivery: Aston and Birmingham Univ; Kingston and London Met; Salford & Manchester Met (MMU).

Table 3 - numbers of businesses completing the original LtG baseline workshop and businesses with baseline data.

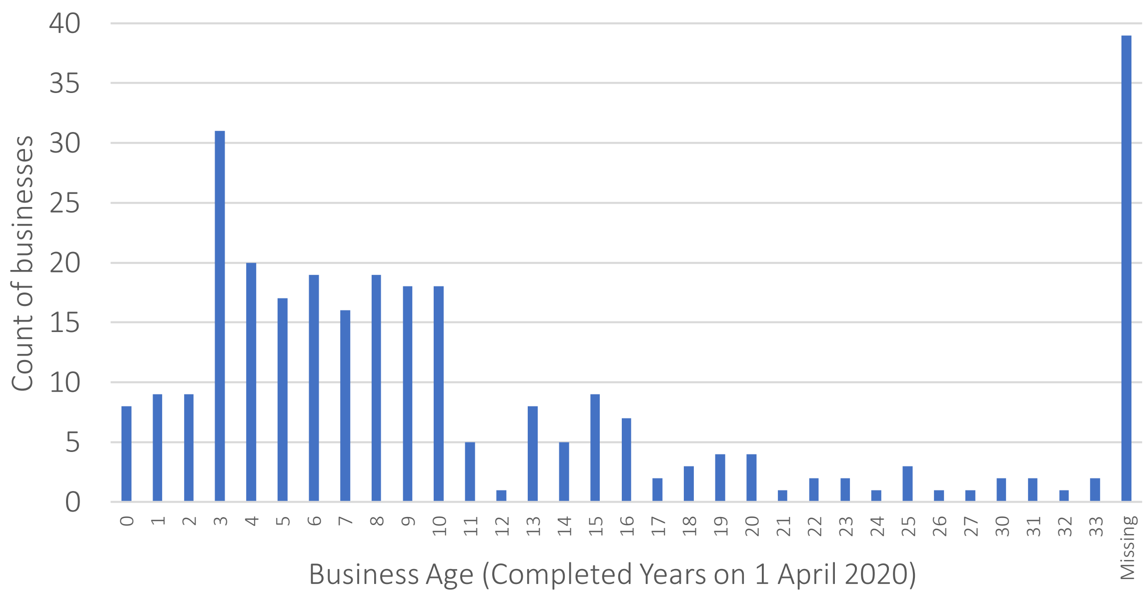
Business School	Number of Businesses that Completed original LtG Workshop	Businesses With Baseline Data
Aston	26	17
Birmingham	Inc. above (ran workshops with Aston)	11
DMU	13	13
Leicester	28	26
Kingston	17	17
London Met	9	Inc. above
Northumbria	30	30
Coventry	8	5
Sheffield Hallam	12	13
Staffordshire	8	32
Leeds Beckett	12	4
Sheffield Management	49	49
Nottingham Trent	20	24
Salford	45	18
Manchester Metropolitan	Inc. above (ran workshop with Salford)	30
Total	**277**	**289**

The characteristics of the businesses recruited into LtG was analysed and is presented below.

Business Age

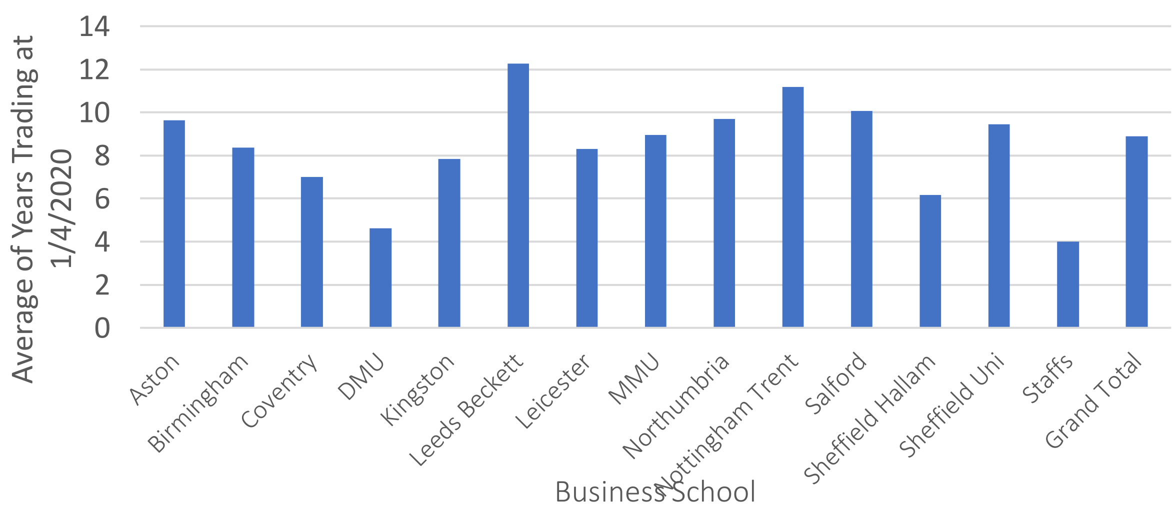
There was some uncertainty from participants over exactly when their business started. Almost all businesses were more than three years old, as per the criterion for LtG eligibility (see Fig. 1). Those under three years old were businesses that were included after the programme pivoted towards being a Covid-response and the age criterion was relaxed. Almost two thirds (63%) of businesses of stated age were between 3 and 10 years old.

Figure 1 - Histogram of Business Age of Sample (completed years as of 1 April 2020) n=289



The mean age of business recruited to LtG was 9 years old. There was some notable variation between business schools (see Fig. 2). DMU and Sheffield Hallam appeared to have recruited businesses that were younger than average. (The average for Staffordshire was just 4 years, although self-reported business age was missing for all except two cases.)

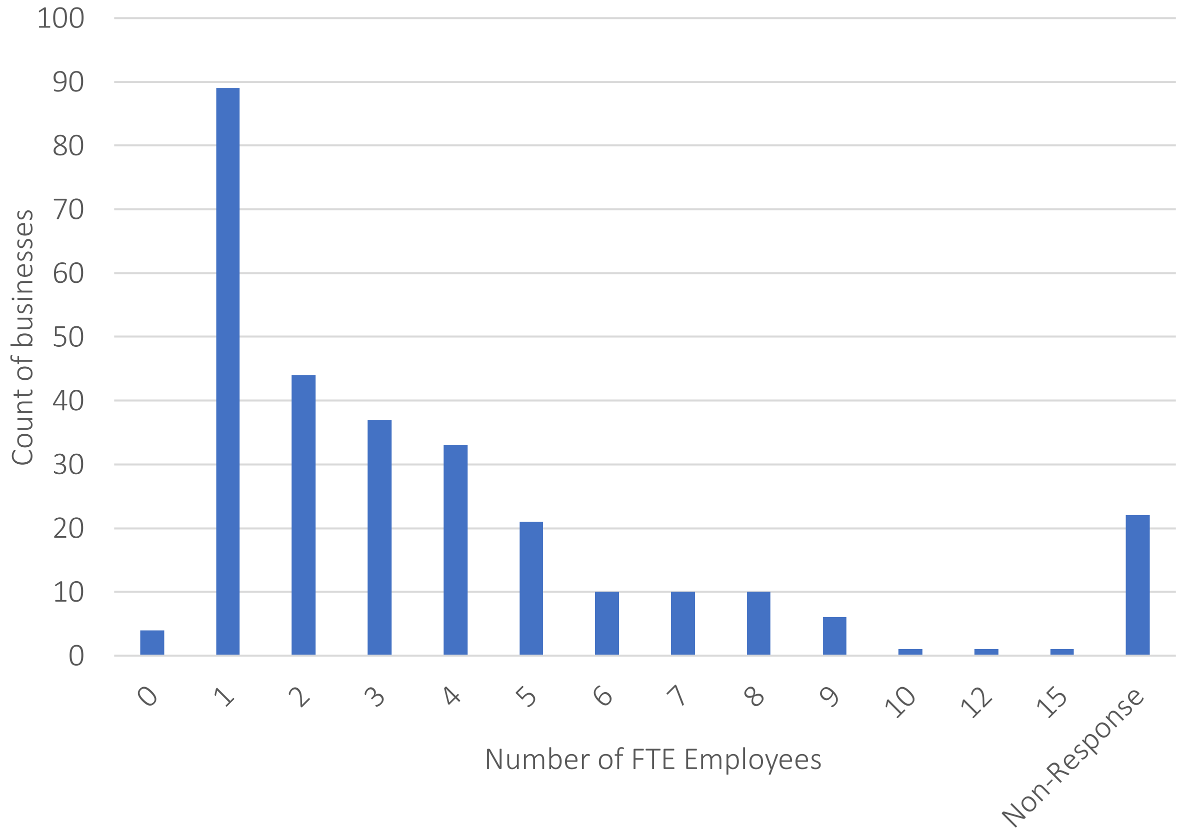
Figure 2 - Mean age (in years) of businesses engaged in LtG by business school



LtG was designed for micro-businesses with 1-9 employees, and 97% of businesses providing data reported a number of FTE employees in that range (see Fig. 3). One third of the businesses recruited to LtG has one FTE employee – presumably, in most cases this will be a director employee.

The current data about the UK-wide business population (the Business Population Estimates from BEIS, 2020) suggests 12% of microbusinesses have one employee, 65% have 2-4 employees and 23% have 5-9 employees. We cannot make an exact comparison as we present full-time equivalent employees in LtG, rather than numbers unadjusted for working hours, but it would suggest that the LtG recruits are on average smaller micro-businesses than those in the wider UK business population. Only 21% of LtG businesses have 2 to 4 FTE employees, whereas 65% of all microbusinesses have 2 to 4 employees.

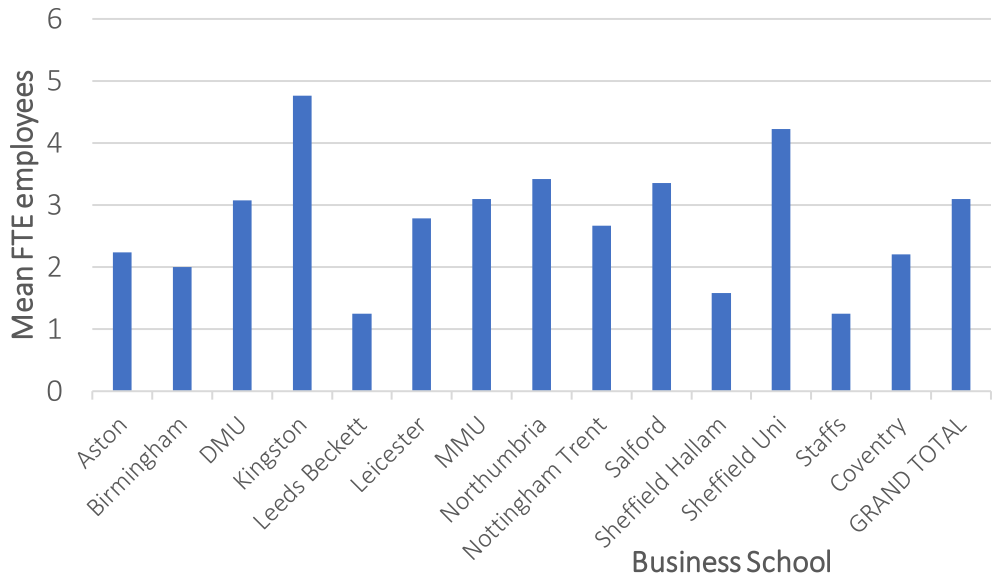
Figure 3 – Numbers of Full-time equivalent businesses engaged in LtG



Employees

The mean number of FTE employees per business recruited to LtG was 3 (even though the mode was 1, because of the clear skew in the data). Only microbusinesses recruited by Sheffield University and Kingston University averaged more than 4 FTE employees (see Fig. 4).

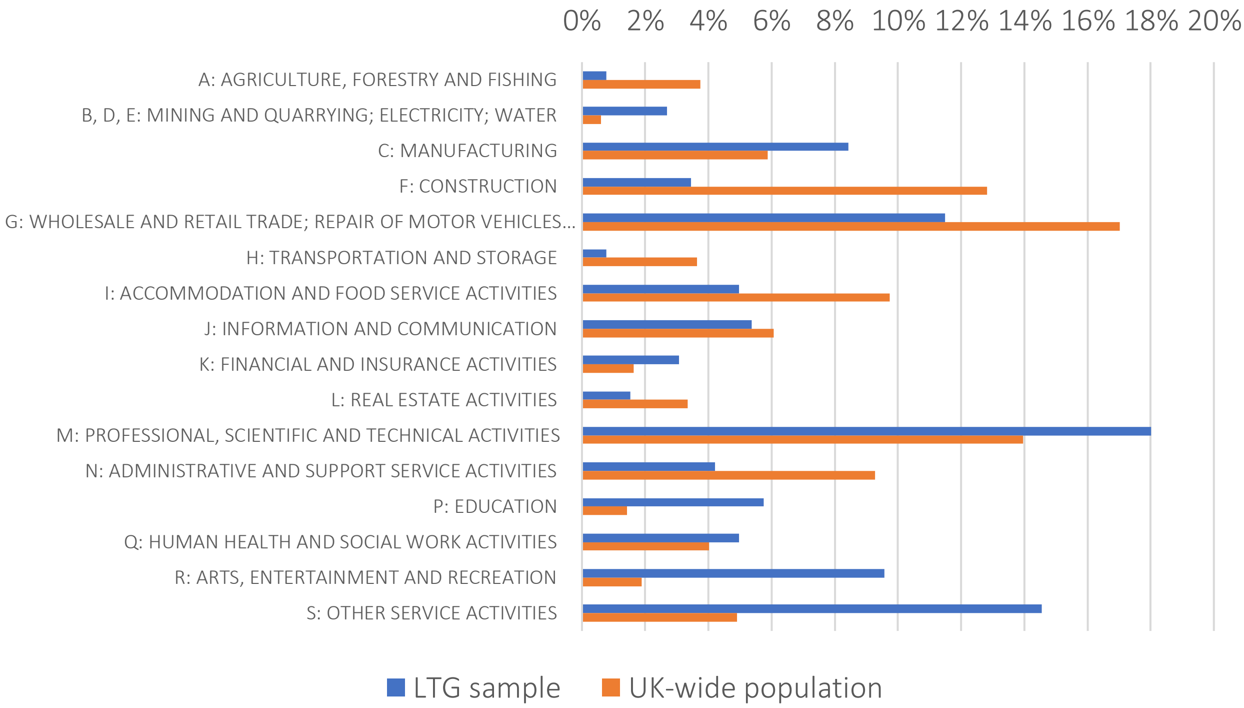
Figure 4 - Mean number of FTE employees in businesses recruited to LtG by each school



Sector

LtG participant businesses came from the full spectrum of industry sectors. No major industrial group was unrepresented (see Fig. 5). Some sectors had more representation than others, with 18% working in the professional, scientific and technical activities; the biggest single sector. Other service activities were well represented (14% of LtG businesses), as was Wholesale and retail trade (11%). Construction was probably the sector that is relatively large in the wider economy, but was least well represented within LtG. This could be a consequence of the focus of recruitment on digital technology adoption.

Figure 5 - Sector of businesses on LtG, compared to UK SME business population (from BPE) n=261



Annual Turnover

Mean annual turnover of LtG participating businesses was £294,000 (see table 4 below). Two businesses stated a turnover of £4M per year. Four schools had businesses that reported zero turnover. There are doubts about the accuracy of all responses and whether all businesses fully understood the term of “turnover”. For example, one case reports negative turnover, so may instead be reporting profit/loss. Other data entries reported multi-million pound turnovers yet only had one employee. Comparing with the accounts filed at Companies House gave strong indications that the turnover stated was in £ rather than £k. The data was amended accordingly in those cases, although some errors may persist.

Table 4 - Annual turnover stated for LtG Businesses

	Annual Turnover (£K)		
Business School	Average	Min Response	Max Response
Aston	112	0	450
Birmingham	56	10	150
Kingston	500	500	500
Leeds Beckett	248	40	500
Leicester	213	0	608
MMU	429	6	4000
Northumbria	247	-3	750
Nottingham Trent	409	20	1000
Salford	251	12	850
Sheffield Hallam	185	5	1250
Sheffield Uni	431	0	1600
Grand Total (n=249)	**294**	**-3**	**4000**

Change in Turnover

The businesses were asked about their change in turnover looking back over the last twelve months, and their expectations for next year. Just over half (51%) of businesses said their turnover increased in the last twelve months (see table 5). The LtG businesses were optimistic about the future, with 62.5% expecting turnover to increase in the next 12 months. The timing of the responses should be noted: most responses will have been made before the first Covid-19 lockdown started, so will be unlikely to have anticipated anything like the huge economic disruption caused to the economy in 2020 and in the years to come.

Table 5 - Reported change in annual turnover, last year and next, by LtG participants.

	Turnover change over 12 months	NOW COMPARED TO LAST YEAR					
		Increase	Stay the same	Decrease	Don't know	Total	%age
EXPECT NEXT YEAR (vs. NOW)	Increase	112	22	19	10	163	62.5%
	Stay the same	5	10	2	5	22	8.4%
	Decrease	8	2	3	4	17	6.5%
	Don't know	9	12	32	6	59	22.6%
	Total	133	47	56	25	261	
	Percentage	51.0%	18.0%	21.5%	9.6%		

Refocussed LtG with EiRs

The EiRs that had been engaged to conduct Stage 2 of the RCT did successfully work with a large number of the businesses that that previously been engaged in the Leading to Grow programme (most of which had attended the baseline workshop either in person or online). In total, 195 businesses worked with one of 33 different EiRs (see Table 6). In addition, 11 different webinars were delivered by the business schools for participants across the LtG programme

Each EiR completed two spreadsheets for each business: a diagnostic record of the engagement with each business, and a timesheet for accountability and payment purposes. A full qualitative analysis of each of those 195 engagements has not been conducted. The nature of responding to a fast-moving emergency has the consequence of greater variability in consistency between responses.

Instead, the themes from the EiR engagements were extracted by discussions at school-level between their EiR and the local LtG administrator. These were then relayed back to CABS to produce an overall programme-level view.

Context

Most of the EiR interventions took place in June and July 2020. Although the total lockdown started to ease in mid-May, even after this easing, government instructions at that time were that non-essential businesses were to remain closed if they could not operate remotely with staff working from home.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS, aka 'furlough') continued to operate, covering more than one quarter of all private sector employees, with no requirement for any employer financial contribution (although many topped up the 80% government contribution to salaries). In essence, this temporarily moth-balled many businesses through the height of the first wave of the pandemic by sheltering them from the immediate adverse market conditions, with government paying staff not to work.

This made it challenging to **contact LtG participants**, since they were mostly **not at their work premises, instead being based at home**. Although, telephones would often divert and emails could be accessed at home, staff that were furloughed typically put on an out-of-office response to explain they were not working and were not monitoring their mailboxes.

Although the funder, BEIS, provided a letter explaining that the rules of furlough allowed employees to engage in training activity. This had limited success in enabling participants to engage with the EiR support offered. The **fear of losing the financial support** from the HMRC for an actual or perceived breach of the furlough rules carried a much higher value to businesses that the strength of reassurance from a different part of the UK government.

A surer safeguard against inadvertently breaking rules by conducting any business during furlough was to stop listening. Many businesses simply became uncontactable - telephones weren't answered and emails weren't opened – and the opportunity to explain never arose. EiR feedback suggested about **15% of attempted contacts were unreachable.**

Table 6 - Data on EiR engagements

Business School	Number of participants (businesses) who received EiR interventions after project refocused	Number of EiR's per Business school	Business schools that chose to run an online workshop with the funding
Aston	9	4	Yes (4) Developing Strategy in a Crises / 3x FINAL LtG webinar - Lessons from LtG
Birmingham	4	1	n/a
DMU	4	2	n/a
Leicester	29	2	Yes (1) Innovation in a Time of Crisis
Kingston	16	3	Yes (3) Designing a Website that Supports Your Business Goals and How to Make Social Media Work for You / Pivoting Your Value Proposition / Surviving and Thriving After the COVID-19 Crisis
Northumbria	13	3	n/a
Coventry	5	1	n/a
London Met	Combined with Kingston for the EiR Interventions	0	Yes (1) Strategic Business Exit
Sheffield Hallam	13	4	n/a
Staffordshire	25	3	Yes (1) Business communication for coming out of lockdown
Leeds Beckett	4	1	n/a
Sheffield Management	18	3	n/a
Nottingham Trent	19	3	Yes (3) Creating your customer journey and finding the right CRM system to help you grow your business / Building a Business Continuity Plan / What next for sports based businesses in the region – A conversation with Martin Ingham, CEO of Nottingham MotorPoint Arena and National Ice Centre
Salford	17	2	n/a
Manchester Metropolitan	19	1	n/a
Total	**195**	**33**	**13**

Engaging with microbusinesses
Just as microbusinesses are an incredibly diverse group the issues they face from the business disruption were incredibly varied. There was **no stereotypical story** although **several themes recurred**.

EiRs found reaching out to the businesses could be challenging in the environment of exceptional uncertainty. **Business owners and directors tended to be easier to reach** than employees, presumably because of the incentives to fight for their own business survival, but also because the availability of government financial support for them was more likely to be lower (less likely to be employees and to draw income from the business via salary).

A minority of businesses were able to keep operating largely as usual. They could be **extremely busy** with the day-to-day running of their business, seeking to make the most of the situation while they are able to trade. Other businesses had been entirely suspended and **temporarily ceased trading**.

One-to-One support and advice
The diversity of needs among microbusiness was reflected in the support that EiRs were able to offer. For **some businesses that were unable to operate** and experiencing a total loss of income, the immediate help required could be little more than **moral support and signposting** to the government provision.

Other microbusinesses **remained committed to adopting the digital technologies** that were covered in the initial workshop of the LtG programme, as soon as economic conditions enabled. The new challenge that such microbusinesses reported were **funding constraints**, presumably because of additional costs associated with surviving the current disruption. Coupled with this, there appeared to be **little awareness** in the initial meetings of the EiR with businesses of the new government support schemes in place (e.g. **Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme** and **Bounce-Back Loans**), and those microbusinesses hadn't previously investigated what was available or applied yet.

Group sessions and webinars
Where business schools had run webinars, these had received positive feedback from microbusiness leaders. They provided a **rare opportunity to network** and share experiences. This included **exchanging views** about software or tools to transition to conducting business more digitally (e.g. which was the best CRM system) and signposting to other growth programmes and sources of funding.

Towards the end of July 2020, as the bulk of engagements with the EiRs had been initiated, a survey to ascertain impacts was conducted with the EIRs. Although too early to report on business metrics, it did appear well received in helping businesses survive and adapt to the economic emergency. The businesses were not surveyed directly, in part because of the difficulty in being able to contact them all simply.

Views on EiR Sessions
The EiRs were surveyed twice. They first responded in mid-July 2020, via the business schools, as many of them were nearing the end of their engagement with the businesses. An

online survey via SurveyMonkey was administered in October seeking reflective feedback with the benefit of a couple of months of having ended their support.

Early feedback during the interventions

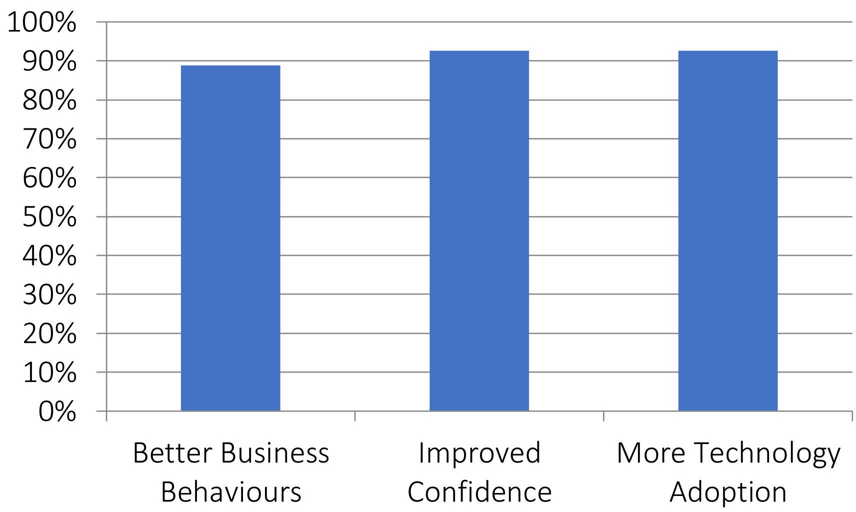
The EiRs reported that the project was overwhelmingly well-received by those approached who responded to the offer of help. The verbatim responses from the business schools to a set of questions aimed at understanding the issues encountered and the type of help offered is reported in Appendix 3 As an illustration, a few of the testimonies direct from the supported businesses are also included in Appendix 4.

Final EiR follow-up survey

After all the interventions had finished, in October 2020, the EiRs were surveyed on their views from participation in the programme. This achieved a good response rate with each question having responses from around 26 or 27 of the EiRs: 80% of all EiRs used.

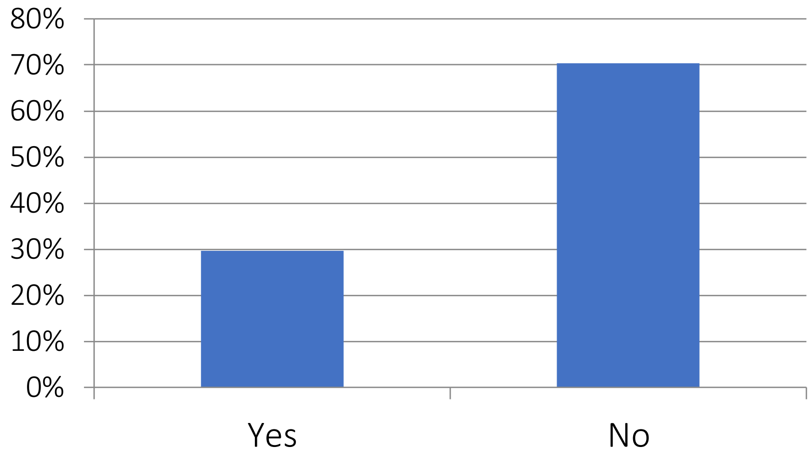
In terms of what change the EiRs anticipated in the businesses helped, around 90% of EiRs thought the anticipated change would be observed in each of three areas: exhibiting better business behaviours; improved business confidence; and, more technology adoption (Fig 6).

Figure 6: EiR Survey: What do you expect to see SMEs doing differently as a result of the support? Tick all that apply n=27



About 30% of EiRs worked with at least one business where they said that they didn't expect to see any benefit in business performance (Fig 7).

Figure 7 – EiR Survey: Did you work with any SMEs who you do not expect to see benefits? n =27

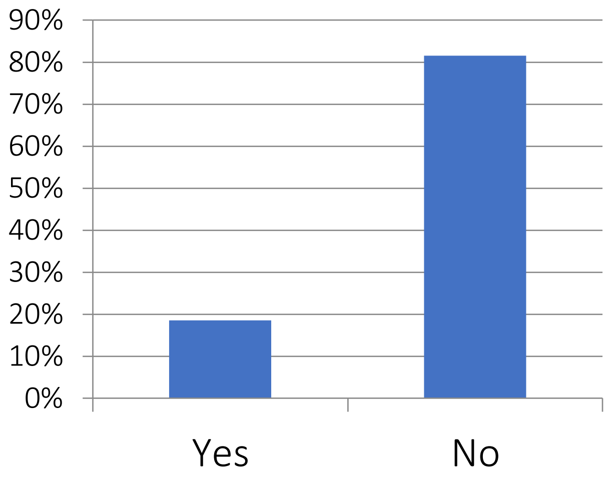


The reasons cited by the EiRs for businesses not anticipating seeing benefits included:

- Businesses that are averse to change
- Magnitude of change needed being too large in current climate
- One business thought that the support would be on leadership development due the title of the support. One hoped that the support was attached to grants. A couple of businesses came late and were only able to fit in an introductory session.
- Business not able to survive. It is going out of business and/or business owner seeking alternative employment. Hence the support was appreciated but not going to be implemented.
- One business found it difficult to adapt and change to the current situation, a lack of confidence in digital skills. Fear over the length of time this will continue, a sole trader, who was feeling isolated and needed more support over a longer period, to ?
- One of the businesses was interested in the EiR doing research and analysis for him, and he wasn't receptive to mentoring or other forms of feedback on the challenges/opportunities he was facing.
- Another business was a very face-to-face one in HR. Knew he needed to change, but didn’t interact to follow up the initial suggestions.
- One owner/manager simply not being able to remove himself from fire-fighting.

The majority of EiRs (4 out of 5) thought 4 hours support was not the right length of time with each business (Fig. 8). This was an interesting departure from views of the business schools, which largely thought it was about right, given the constraints of the programme on the amount that could be invested through the EiR on each participant.

Figure 8 – EiR survey: Did 4 hours support feel like enough time with each business n=27



The text feedback given to explain the responses consistently expressed that 4 hours was only long enough to get a very initial understanding of the business and build some confidence and trust from the business owner. In the time available there was the opportunity to give an initial diagnostic for what the business should do, but there wasn't time to help many of the businesses actually implement change and to respond with help to any barriers or difficulties encountered. Some of the digital technology areas covered by the programme in the baseline workshop were considered substantial areas of change for a business, and so really demanded more time over a longer period of intervention.

Reflecting on this when the EiRs were asked, "**how would you have changed the scope of the Covid support and coaching to be more impactful to the SMEs?**", the most common change recommended was more time. Typically, EiRs did not solely advise to include more time – typically 5-8 hours total – but they wished it was delivered over a longer duration so that support could flex to be delivered more alongside implementation of advice. Another theme raised that less of a gap in time was preferable between attendance at the baseline workshop and the EiR intervention. This, of course, was not how the programme was designed or would have been configured had the pandemic not interrupted the trial.

Non-take up of offer.

The EiRs were asked about reasons for declining the offer of support. Of the almost 300 businesses eligible, about 250 businesses were approached by EiRs. The reason some businesses were not approached was a consequence of the contact sample held in some business schools from the baseline workshops exceeding either the EiR delivery capacity or the funding allocation. The original plan of LtG was to offer EiR support to a maximum of 30 businesses with an expectation that no more than 25 would take up the offer in any single school.

Almost 190 businesses were helped by EiRs, meaning that around 60 businesses were approached but were not helped. Overall, the EiR responses suggest that 60% of the non-response was due to inability to contact the business, with the other 40% being contacted but declining to participate for whatever reason. The proportion of non-response varied a lot at EiR-level. Three EiRs apparently reported 100% refusal or non-contact, while five EiRs had

100% take-up. Whether this is due to random variation or signals some underlying difference between EiRs or the data quality in the sample provided to them by the schools is unknown.

The EiRs were asked for any views of what more might have been done to persuade businesses who did not take up interventions to do so. The themes that emerged included:

- Follow-up more quickly after attendance at the baseline workshop
- More flexibility about when the support could be taken. If the business was particularly busy the month we called, then they largely missed the opportunity.
- Better brand recognition, perhaps backed by some case studies of impact.
- Clarity of marketing – it wasn't clear to all EiRs whether it was about the direct impact of Covid or how to absorb, survive and grow. Also how much focus on digital technology adoption needed to be retained in the sessions: for many businesses this wasn't their immediate focus.

EiR views of the LtG programme

EiRs responded about their views on the LtG programme overall. On balance they were extremely positive and expressed pleasure about having been involved in the programme. They thought the programme was very valuable and much needed. They received fulsome praise and gratitude from the businesses with whom they worked. Overall, they felt strongly the programme worked and had impact.

A few of the EiRs commented that it was a shame that the original purpose of the LtG programme was lost, but were supportive that the need and rationale for it remained strong. One EiR lamented the amount of paperwork requested by the evaluation and the fact that this wasn't pinned down from the outset. They felt it took focus away from the support being offered outward to the businesses.

The future for the participating businesses

When asked, how do you think these businesses could be supported in the future?, the EiRs gave plentiful ideas about the businesses having continued access to support including follow-up sessions in the next 3, 6 or 9 months, access to webinar masterclasses; and connection into the wider business advice network including Growth Hub, the LEP, Chambers of Commerce, busines school, etc.

Evaluation of Programme Implementation

This was a programme that achieved an important goal of assisting around 200 small businesses at a time of peak uncertainty through the disruption to the economy caused by the Covid pandemic, and helped explain the potential Evaluation of digital technology to more than 100 other microbusinesses. External events prevented the RCT element of the programme being delivered, so there are no results from the quantitative experiment.

However, the two halves of LtG provided a wide variety of operational insights: they are highlighted in this discussion. At this stage, there is little to report on impact since outcomes from the interventions are as yet unknown. There was strong support from the EiRs that, in a post-Covid world, the original need for the programme remained as imperative as ever. The learning discussed here might serve to make future delivery more effective and efficient.

RCT Implementation

Prior to even advertising the intervention to potential participant businesses, several learning points for delivering emerge

Preparation of delivery materials

- Although the rationale and logic chain of the programme was well mapped-out prior to commencement, the forms and data flows to implement the programme were not designed sufficiently early so that all parties involved in delivery knew exactly what the information requirements were, and how they flowed.
- Ideally, the data entry forms and questionnaires for the business schools, participant businesses and for EIRs would have been piloted and confirmed in advance.
- This point is particularly true of the programme materials, such as the materials for delivering a consistent baseline workshop, the specification for recruiting EiRs, and the content guides for the EIRs to use in 1-2-1 coaching.
- In addition to delivering the RCT against a challenging timescale, one factor that mitigated against rapid preparation of these materials was that the design and delivery came from the collaboration of delivery centres to generate the materials. The LtG programme was run with a relatively light-touch centre and operated by a more collegiate approach, rather than a strong, top-down, command-and-control organisation.

Working with Universities

- Building on the above point, it is debatable whether a model of strong central prescription with a large range of universities is particularly feasible. Business schools are faculties or departments within a larger university structure, and are not entirely free to flex in their working practices to the needs of a wider programme.
- This was true when it came to ethics approval and data processing. As research intensive organisations, universities have their own well-developed mechanisms for considering and granting ethical approval. Without the ethical consent of the

umbrella university for each participating business schools, the school would not be able to participate. Here, ethic approval for the entire trial was considered by one university's ethics committee (in this case, Aston University) and other business schools applied that ethical consent, by proxy, within their University jurisdiction instead of applying for their own consent locally. This 'reciprocal rights' approach to ethics was not without some friction because although it massively saved paperwork in other universities, it is not an automatic process and still required validation by each respective university ethics committee to approve activity being undertaken within their own university.

Recruitment

- None of the schools recruited 50 microbusinesses to attend the baseline workshop. The highest number of businesses attending the workshop was 49 (Sheffield University Management School), which is so close to 50 that it made it impractical to run further workshops to recruit more businesses. This, however, was the exception and some schools recruited fewer than 10 businesses into the baseline workshop
- There was clearly an **optimism bias** around recruitment, since beforehand schools had considered each recruiting 50 businesses into the baseline workshops was an achievable goal.
- There are various aspects cited by the business schools to the weak recruitment in most localities:
    - **Identifying new businesses** – some schools found it challenging to reach new businesses with whom they had not already at a relationship. In this respect, the ineligibility of businesses that had worked with the schools in the last 12 months made many of their most readily targetable firms out of scope for the programme. There was no shortage of microbusinesses in the local labour markets of any busines school, but reaching businesses that do not naturally exhibit advice-seeking behaviour is a common problem with interventions for small businesses. Lack of recognition in some schools that they quickly needed to open up new channels of communication to those businesses meant that they got off to a slow start on marketing.
    - **Brand identity** – some schools lamented that recruitment was made more difficult by a lack of brand identity for the Leading to Grow programme. They thought the name was effective and attractive, but businesses considering participation would not be able to know in advance what the programme would cover and whether it was any good. It wasn't obvious in the name that the focus of the programme was about identifying the opportunities of digital technology adoption.
    - **'No shows'** – every school had many more businesses that had signed up to attend the half-day baseline workshop failing to attend. The level of over-recruitment needed was difficult to predict until some workshops had been delivered. The evaluator had advised schools to expect a best case scenario that one-quarter of sign-ups failed to attend. Some schools were better than

others at keeping their sign-ups 'warm': this means email messages to whet the appetite that could serve as reminders and maintain psychological commitment of the businesses owners, and telephoning the businesses prior to attendance.

- Lack of cost – some schools considered that the lack of financial commitment made to attend the baseline workshop contributed to poor attendance rates of those signing-up. While that might be a factor, offering no charge to participate ought to have significant benefits on the numbers prepared to sign-up in the first place.

- Need for physical attendance - Other schools commented that the need for physical attendance for a lengthy part of the day (4 hrs + travel time) was a disincentive for some businesses. While this might be true, the logic model of the programme design had peer-mediated effects as an important mechanism for achieving impact and commitment to deploying new digital technology. It could be argued that if businesses fell at this first hurdle in their commitment of time to the programme, then they would be unlikely to continue their participation through the later stages or change behaviour: a commitment to wanting to learn about the potential of digital technology in their business was a 'soft' eligibility criterion of the programme.

- Ineligible businesses – the majority of schools had businesses attending the baseline workshops that were ineligible for the programme. Informal feedback suggests businesses that were ineligible against each one of the eligibility criteria were encountered. Two frequent reasons for ineligibility that are easy to check against independent data sources were the businesses under 3 years old and those without any employees (i.e. sole traders). As part of managing the sign-up list prior to attendance at the baseline workshop, some schools might potentially have done more to reiterate the eligibility criteria of the programme. Feedback from the business schools was that they mostly did try and did make reasonable efforts to confirm eligibility.

Data quality

- Data quality received from most business schools was less complete than desirable. The information requested about attitudes to technology adoption were particularly poorly completed.

- Online data collection To improve collation of the data, ideally data entry forms would have been completed online. Too much data was incomplete, because the collation methods of data from across the business schools had too much variation. This involved completing and returning a single spreadsheet per school, which was then aggregated centrally within CABS. Not all schools were equally capable at providing data that was complete and accurate.

- Data responses – a surprising number of business leaders apparently could not provide basic facts about their businesses, such as annual turnover amounts and time trends.

- **Data keying** – In hindsight it would have been helpful to reiterate to the schools the importance of collecting data that was as accurate as possible. The most obvious example of where inaccurate keying could adversely impact analysis. Responses for annual turnover were requested in £k, whereas some data had been entered in £. The implications of numerical responses that are wrong by three orders of magnitude are self-evident. Although obvious data outliers could be cleaned, some responses were plausible either way e.g. £1000k or £1000. Responses were requested to the nearest £1k, but were typically given rounded to one or two significant figures.

Funding

A couple of aspects of the funding model may have contributed to difficulty with recruitment

- **Hard-wired rigidity** – working with 15 different, independent delivery organisations requires contractual commitments that bake-in a tendency for under-recruitment. All delivery centres were provided with the same contractual requirements and funding model. Each schools was able to be funded for 50 participants at the baseline workshop and for 25 to work with EIRs. Schools that under-recruited on any stage were only funded pro-rata on achieved results. It is a statistical reality that variation in recruitment rates between localities will occur and, ideally, at programme level there would be a mechanism that enables over-recruitment to occur in other localities. Inevitably, there is a time lag between any area suffering weaker recruitment knowing and accepting that situation, so that resources can flow rapidly to areas where recruitment has been smoother so that over-recruitment can be funded.

- Collegiate delivery – related to this, LtG delivery was strongly collegiate in implementation, with the balance of funding for the experiment being distributed to the delivery centres for both funding delivery of the workshops and EIR sessions and for design of the resources workshop content, specification for EIR recruitment, design of EIR sessions. This was at the expense of the resource available centrally for ensuring compliance and monitoring receipt of complete and accurate data.

Emergency Covid-response

- Once LtG had pivoted to provide an emergency response to businesses, delivery was very successful on a range of fronts. A high proportion of the businesses contacted took up the offer of free support and the feedback provided by the businesses assisted was very positive.

- Several of the EIRs went 'above-and-beyond' the maximum 4 hours of face-to-face delivery for which they were funded, and provided further input at no additional cost; a reflection of the relationship EiRs had with the business schools and a desire to deliver the best possible support for themselves, the microbusiness and the reputation of the business school.

- The timescale for delivery meant that businesses approached by the EiRs had relatively little latitude about the timing of assistance. They needed to be at a stage where they were contactable and able to reflect and makes plans about the future. Many businesses approached were either uncontactable or not able to make use of the support at that time. Some of the businesses will already have concluded that they were no longer viable by the time they were approached. Others might have been helped at a later date if the delivery could have flexed more to their timing needs.

- The rapid nature of the pivot meant that not all elements of the diagnostic used by EiRs were relevant for each client. This engagement had originally been conceived as about facilitating digital technology adoption. Within the economic consequences of the pandemic, this was not universally applicable, and EiRs were generally effective in using discretion to ensure the relationship developed in a way that was relevant to the client businesses.

Conclusion

Leading to Grow (LtG) was conceived as an experiment that would test whether microbusinesses could improve their speed and range of digital technology adoption to improve their productivity. The catalyst for this conceived impact was through the coaching and advice of an experienced business professional – the Entrepreneur in Residence (EiR) – provided through the business school or management school of a local University affiliated to the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS). The programme was overtaken by the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that the original programme, was terminated. However, despite the unprecedented and unforeseeable disruption, there were valuable delivery insights gained and emergency support provided to many microbusinesses.

Possibly, the key deliverable was achieving delivery of a single consistent programme through 15 different business schools. Business schools are part of universities that spend more of their time competing against one another for students and research income. Although not without some implementation challenges, arising from setting up a completely new programme in a short space of time, the business schools did work very well together in developing materials and providing an intervention that was focussed first and foremost on assisting microbusinesses.

Although the recruitment challenges were encountered by many of the business schools, delivery plans adapted to mitigate this to some degree, by extending programme advertising and scheduling additional baseline workshops. Often, these did not come to fruition in the format of earlier baseline workshops, because they needed to be moved online as Covid concerns began to increase and, within a short space of time later, stopped altogether.

Over one third (37%) of the intended 750 businesses attended a baseline workshop. Had the programme continued without Covid interruption it is likely that overall recruitment would have been nearer 500 (two-thirds of planned).

The refocused programme from May 2020 using the resource available from the recruited EiRs did succeed in supporting at least 195 businesses with 1-2-1 support from one of 33 experienced business professionals and with access to webinars and masterclasses. The feedback from those businesses was extremely positive with many powerful testimonies provided by businesses, which were also echoed by then views of the EiRs. Delivering this activity to so many businesses at a time of emergency for all is a fantastic demonstration of rapid adaptability.

Once the economy begins to re-open to whatever becomes ‘normal’ post-pandemic, it is likely that the productivity challenges confronting the UK economy will persist. The original rationale will remain and the need to test the programme continues. What is already clear however is that the digital landscape within the economy has changed, including the behaviours and preferences of consumers and wider recognition of where technology can substitute for human labour.

Appendix 1 - The baseline workshop

These were a series of half-day (4 hour) workshops for all businesses signing up to the "Leading to Grow" programme. This were led by the Business Schools recruiting the businesses in their catchment area. The common content of this workshop focussed on **"Managing Digital & New Technology Adoption"** through an understanding of developing the capabilities that enable businesses to exploit digital technologies in order to develop where they would like the business to be in the future. The workshops were intended to be delivered in a peer-learning environment, which is the tried and tested method adopted by Business Schools globally, through face-to-face workshops with the businesses.

The focus was on management capability in the form of business strategy to inform digital and new technology adoption (rather than the technologies per se). It used engaging and action-oriented pedagogy to emphasis co-creation of knowledge with micro business owners. The format and content of the workshop is intended to be consistently replicable across the partnership – achieved through the use of two or three common tools/techniques – without being slavishly scripted.

A scaffold that gave the sessions a common structure was:

1st half hour	Welcome & Introduction. Ice breaker – find out why people are in the room and what they expect to get out of the workshop
2nd half hour	Introduction to the project - aims & objectives - evaluation plan and RCT. Exciting opportunity to test how much expert advice and technology adoption can improve business performance. Context (emphasis on technology and productivity) by the Business Basics delivery team.
3rd half hour	Introduction to visioning by the Business Basics team In small groups – micro-businesses start to apply a model /framework to their business context
20 mins	Break and networking
4th half hour	Continue visioning – Ask the groups to consider the role of technology in moving from current state to achieving the desired state (vision)
5th half hour	Share knowledge. Report back to the group on the process and outcomes
6th half hour	Introduction to 'action planning for technology adoption' using a specific tool or technique (which one is yet to be decided)
Final time	Share knowledge. Report back to the group on the process and outcomes. Explain next steps in programme. i.e. everyone followed-up to see what has been learned, and whether it encouraged trying to adopt any ideas given. Randomly, 60% to be offered free expert 1:1 advice and guidance to help solve any uncertainties or barriers they may have.

Appendix 2 – Stages of the trial not conducted

From the initial recruitment and participation in baseline workshop (Stage 1) the following stags of the trial were planned for businesses in the treatment group but not implemented because of the Covid pandemic.

STAGE 2 – Entrepreneur-in-Residence (EiR) support – Treatment businesses only

Treatment businesses were to be allocated 4 hours of individual and personalised time with an 'entrepreneur in residence' (EiR) from the Business School that delivered the workshop. The EiR will be selected by the Business School based on their track record in the successful adoption of web-based technologies and management practices leading to improved business performance and productivity gains.

Our hypothesis was that the EiR would be seen by the participants in the trial as a credible source of advice. The EiR would convene a follow-up appointment of half a day's duration a month after the initial workshop to discuss the content of the workshop, assess the changes already implemented, if any, and 'nudge' or facilitate the business owner/leader towards further or initial adoption.

The EiRs would be responsible for recording all changes that have occurred in the business as a result of the initial workshop through a common template which will be co-designed by the consortium.

The EiRs were recruited by the business schools but briefed centrally on workshop content.

EiR Characteristics

Key criteria for a capable EiRs are:

- Business Schools knowledge of person and capabilities.
- Industry/ commercial experience (ideally 3 years in relevant context)
- Mentoring/ advisory experience (ideally 3 years)
- Awareness of technologies and how this can be incorporated into micro-businesses
- Knowledge of leadership/ change management issues and challenges

EiR Training

The EiRs were briefed on the programme via webinar (Feb 2020). (Funding and timescales do not allow for face-to-face training in this trial). The focus of training was on setting out the process of engagement and agreeing feedback and compulsory monitoring.

- Terms of engagement, schedule of visits
- Spell out monitoring and timescale requirements
- Declaration of any prior interests with micro-business and have not had previous meaningful engagement with them.

- Must not directly sell any product/service
- EiR needs to engage with the diagnostic and workshop content and findings
- The discussion should be employer-led and role of EiR is to help the micro-business to think through required processes, provide objective views and steer the business to make sustainable decisions.
- Need to keep detailed notes of everything and request business to agree and sign-off recommendations.

EiR Time Deployment

The key input this trial tests would be the impact of 4 hours of individual, personalised advice and support with the EiR. The scheme for how that 4 hours should be distributed is provided below. This could be in a single 4hr meeting or spread across 3 meetings. This was left flexible to assist in capturing the engagement of busy business owners. Regardless of how distributed, at least one of the meetings needed to be face-to-face, and not exclusively phone or web-based.

Broad structure for the EiR intervention:

- Initial meeting – c. 1 hour. Fact finding and scoping out nature and focus of advice (e.g. priority technology). Completing diagnostic. Matching to needs.
- Main meeting – c. 2.5 hours. Discussion of options and potential technology solutions Share sources of information, guidance, tools etc. Discuss potential benefits. Identify costs and resource needs. Identify any risks/ pitfalls and mitigation strategies. Prepare detailed implementation plans. Agree actions. Prepare for follow-up at last session.
- Final meeting – c. 0.5 hours by phone/Skype. Discuss progress since final meeting. Identify any problems, issues, constraints and mitigation strategies. Brokerage to other support and information sources. Confirm and agree onward actions.

STAGE 3 – Final Workshop – Treatment businesses only

Each Business School and EiRs would bring together their group of Stage 2 participant micro-businesses after a further month to allow the business owners to interact with their peers as they grapple with similar challenges. Ideally this would be face-to-face.

The logic here was to cement commitment to implementation and troubleshoot any initial barriers or reluctance. The peer-to-peer nature should have provided a useful multiplier effect on impact, since converts could persuade through demonstration the sceptical or the hesitant and share some early quick wins. This approach has been observed to be a key component of positive impact in previous programmes.

Appendix 3 – Rapid feedback by EiRs in July 2020

Verbatim feedback from the business schools in eight localities from 10 schools in response to six prompts.

Q1 - General feedback on how EiR interventions are being received by the supported businesses.

Birmingham:

- Feedback has been great. Every founder asked if and how they could gain more 1-2-1 support, which is the ultimate test of effectiveness.

Leicester:

- Very much welcomed and appreciated by all those who received interventions. EiRs reported that firms were genuinely disappointed when the support came to an end.

Manchester Metropolitan University:

- Very well received. Most have stated how timely it has been in the middle of lockdown.

Northumbria University:

- EiR 1: For all of the ones allocated, I have set expectations of how the support will be delivered. All of them have found it useful and timely . Appreciative, of the development and support advice delivered.
- EiR 2: The key problem is one of time for many businesses and the time to undertake the follow up. So businesses are not using online tools as much as they could e.g. blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn etc. They are using elements of them but in an uncoordinated way and with no strategy or training.
- I have sent them away to consider different aspects – so the first consideration for one was getting their website right as no point in developing a blog until that is functioning. They have then sought to take it forward but have been slowed down by others not responding to them to review their current activity – so I signposted to a place to help him develop a systems requirement as the first step but this has yet to be completed. Another of the companies to develop their business online tools needs to review their business model as the issues faced are more fundamental and an immediate response on the digital activity would be counter-productive without the wider review first as he needs to work out how to work on his business as opposed to in his business and covid19 has brought this out.
- Therefore key issues:
    1. Need to review BM first and then identify how online activity fits into the business model and strategy
    2. Develop understanding of the tools to be used as this will be driven by strategy
    3. Develop the plan for the online tools and what they will do with it to grow the business.

Nottingham:

- Very positive. The most useful areas have been systems approaches such as adopting simple CRM principles and communicating with customers better; with some shifts in accounting and online sales systems and for a couple ERP, website etc. For others it has been more about dealing with their own leadership styles – being more focused, strategic, working together and in one case taking over from father.

Sheffield Hallam:

- Very well received
- Extremely appreciate of having someone to talk to as owner managers, to bounce ideas around and talking through how to get back on track.
- Opportunity to support them create a sense of momentum and direction following COVID.
- They were sorry that the programme was so short and that they wouldn't have access to the funded EiR intervention going forward.

Sheffield University:

- Feedback has been really good with the business seeking more support and over a wider timeframe.
- The ones that I have managed to deliver have been very grateful for the support. Most have been surprised at the quality of what they were able to access and all have praised the intervention and said that they had benefitted. One or two would have preferred more of a gap between first and second session, but unfortunately this was not possible due to limitations of the timeframe, which was severely restricted due to Covid.
- Overall it has been received positively. Some have really been able to benefit from the service, but others have struggled to get the value due to an already high level of technology use with much more specialist knowledge needed to be able to help the company implement a step-change in their business (Industry 4.0 for example).

Staffordshire:

- In general very well, they have stated that they didn't feel on their own and they found it useful to have an independent voice to sense check with as well as the advice we were providing.

Q2 - Key reasons (if any) for businesses declining the EiR support offered.

Birmingham:

- Did not hear any reasons - maybe missed communications, maybe some too impacted by Coronavirus to be beyond support?

Leicester:

- Many firms were just too busy or in a few cases simply did not respond to the emails (and chase emails) from the EiR.
- The single business that dropped out had expectations for leadership growth training, so it would be good to have a project name matched to the outcomes.

Manchester Metropolitan University:

- It hasn't been businesses declining but rather no answer from the contact details provided. I can only assume that the contact or business has have been furloughed or shut. We have tried multiple routes of contact including web forms.
- One business declined to continue the support after one session but offered no reason. They seemed to enjoy the first session. I asked if they would like to provide feedback and also offered that the programme would still be available if their circumstances changed. I heard nothing in reply.
- One other business was contacted by phone and the owner said she was buying supplies and would call back. She stated that they had shut but had pivoted online with recipe and baking boxes and this had proved successful. They then never returned any calls or emails – I could only assume that they were too busy.

Northumbria University:

- Most of the businesses who didn't progress with an EiR did not respond to email or phone call follow up. Those who responded said the timing wasn't right / had other priorities related to business survival

Nottingham:

- Some furloughed and not responding; some too busy!

Sheffield Hallam:

- Specific reasons aligned to where particular owners were. For example, one had grown substantially during COVID, had an investment opportunity and anxiety levels were high. They were not in a space to engage with this specific programme.
- Some very keen when we spoke to them face to face, but without the constant reminder did not have enough time to engage.
- One was already receiving mentoring and support from another initiative

Sheffield University:

- Small minority of firms were unresponsive or too busy with other issues. No reasons beyond this were discovered, despite chasing up.

Staffordshire:

- Too busy running the business especially if they also had childcare responsibilities
- Too busy because they had furloughed all the workers so were trying to do their job and the job of others

Q3 - Was there anything we could have offered/helped those businesses with, for them to agree to accept the intervention?

Birmingham:

- There was a long delay between workshops and 1-2-1 support (Covid related mainly, so understandable). It would have been preferable to schedule 1-2-1s immediately after the workshops and not wait for the series to finish.

Leicester:

- One point raised by the EiRs was the need to link the intervention more cleanly with the various financial support schemes which were available.

London Met

- Although probably not feasible as it is the first time we have done this, case studies of how businesses have benefited from such interventions previously and how EiRs can help them in general

Manchester Metropolitan University:

- No – just the uncontactable. All others have readily accepted.

Northumbria University:

- Possibly - Difficult to ascertain / know what would have persuaded them to agree to intervention

Nottingham:

- Longer lead time, but then we would have given them something different that might not have helped them in their hour of need.

Sheffield Hallam"

- No, a lot of effort went into trying to engage with the microbusinesses, time, circumstance, nature of a micro influenced engagement.

Sheffield University:

- Two EiRs said nothing to suggest.
- One EiR said. "Yes. One approach would have been to contact them all individually and assess their attitude to the support given the Covid situation. My sense is that some were relatively unaffected and were keen to access the support quickly. Others were just getting 'over the hump' of the issues and would have preferred to access the support slightly later than the end of July timeframe and others perhaps would have been happy to delay to much later in the year.

Staffordshire:

- Time was the main issue [the firms being very busy].

Q4 - Duration of support opinions. Is 4 hours the right amount of time? Or more / less/ different support?

Birmingham:

- I think all founders would have liked to have more sessions, over a longer time frame. Most programmes we deliver are over 6-9 months with 3 to 8 1-2-1 coaching sessions in that period. This provides enough time to get to know the business and enough time between sessions to see changes bung made, hold the founder accountable and support any challenges that occur.

Leicester:

- Time duration was about right. Most firms have taken the 4 hours and it's felt to have been enough in the current business climate. Some needed a bit less or suddenly became busy (which is kind of a good outcome).

London Met

- I think 2 hours could seem more appealing, a few people thought 4 hours was a long time

Manchester Metropolitan University:

- We split the time 2 x 2 hours, and this seemed right for most businesses. We did further split a few sessions where businesses only had an hour to spare. I've normally sent them information after the sessions for them to work through. The sessions have helped them to reset. I've got businesses to focus tightly on what they need to do in the next 3 months to both survive and thrive. Most businesses in the programme are small and haven't got large cash reserves.

Northumbria University:

- EiR 1: For a business wanting support, 4 hours will never realistically cover all of their needs. However, they have positively taken on board action points and support advice. Knowing that they will have to complete , manage the areas identified on their own. Unless they access further support and funding elsewhere . More time is something they all wanted, in terms of implementation of actions outside of their skill sets.

- EiR 2: This depends. On the basis of what we have done so far 4 hours will get them to first base. It won't get them beyond. However, to deliver on the approach will require additional support and so this needs to be identified. So one I directed to [a local publicly-funded IT support service], and then to explore the grant to develop the website first. There is a need to provide support on an on-going basis to get them to execute. So the one requiring BM revision we will get them to develop the point where they have skills to develop their customer personas and their value proposition but we won't get into the implementation. They have engaged a team to help them in online messaging but in a way that is too early within the revision of the BM [business model].

- In summary, for the more developed business 4 hours is enough, but for the majority it is not enough as they have an ill-defined BM [business model] and so the channels to the customer are not defined and so they need to work that out first. To undertake this process in the necessary depth will take 20 hours or more and needs to be guided. Can get stuff online but that doesn't give the drive to do it and the guidance on how to do it and the critical friend as the majority of owners are working in relative isolation.

Nottingham:

- Some could have done with more than 4 hours, but actually we think the balance between group workshops and 1-2-1 support helps to alleviate this. Two of our clients have applied for coaching grants through an ERDF project to continue working with the EiRs for longer – and they have to pay for 50% of this. These are both established businesses.

Sheffield Hallam:

- For those with specific digital interventions four hours felt enough, some needed less.
- For those who needed the strategic direction support, business planning, focus on finances – no. They were just getting started when the time was up and EiR felt they had to apologise that it had to stop at that point. They now need continued support, 'holding to account' against actions, we'd provided guidance and some foundation, they had to now seek to implement. We'd worked through providing a number of areas to go away and work with on their own. We'll look at how we might support these companies further through other initiatives – if we had a SBLP for micros, that might be an option!

Sheffield University:

- The typical view of businesses is that they would prefer more than 4 hours.
- We are taking about an introduction to technology for many or an introduction to new ways of working and processes and this is difficult to achieve in 4 hrs. What I have personally done is tried to direct them to their business support functions such as business Sheffield or the growth hubs .... however we could do this also under this program and then pass on from growth support
- It depends on what the support is supposed to achieve! In 4 hours you can get to understand a bit about the business, identify some priority areas and give a general steer in the right direction. In some 'lucky' cases there are one or two easy/quick wins where this is sufficient to propose a specific solution, but even then, there is little scope for follow up. In the majority of cases, affecting any concrete change requires a much larger chunk of support. 12 hours is widely considered to be the baseline for a business intervention. How that is divvied up between intensive long/focussed sessions or more protracted light touch interventions, spread over time, depends on the individual case.
- Four hours is just enough for an assessment of the situation and to look for recommendations, but not really enough to monitor the implementation and impacts of the new process within the business.

Staffordshire:

- 4 hours is good in general.

Q5 - Information on businesses that have pivoted their service/industry because of Covid-19. What have they done ? How successful has this been for the business?

Birmingham:

- One business successfully moved her live sewing classes online, purchasing extra lighting and camera equipment to enable her to continue operating

- Two other businesses also successfully moved to Zoom-led coaching sessions to continue services

Leicester:

- A few of have started to re-think their business model during lockdown/Covid, partly or wholly stimulated by conversations with EiR. Some have actually found a pick-up in business.

Manchester Metropolitan University:

- One business was furloughed during lockdown and concentrated on a life coaching and female empowerment network instead. The sessions covered how this could be further developed commercially and proposed offline events became online events that have been well attended. A new model for further development has been explored with additional revenue streams identified. Moving forward the two entities will be balanced to work together.

- Another business pivoted from a breastfeeding project to delivering essential baby related supplies such as nappies and formula milk. This exploded and they were extremely busy; too busy with there being a danger of the founder being overwhelmed. The founder managed to recruit some new volunteers and trustees. We went through the roles that they would need to focus in on and where the founder could start to delegate part of the role to free her up.

Northumbria University:

- EiR 1: The realisation that they need to plan more for the unexpected, disaster recovery, procedures and back-up plan . Post-COVID all are now setting aside time to stop, review, adapt and adjust were necessary

- A number have set up support, review sessions to keep ahead of developments in COVID affected business issues. Through Zoom or Teams .

- EiR 2: At this stage none would fall into this category. Businesses did seek to do things online but with variable success as more about getting a bit of income in but could not replace the lost footfall if they were a B2C.

- For the B2B there was variable as to some their business required face-to-face and so they disappeared with lockdown. If their business has benefited the issue is managing the business processes to allow sustain growth.

Nottingham:

- There are some interesting pivots, but also just a lot that have realised that they need to change and been provoked into it. EG an events merchandising company of 20 years who admits that he has never had to think about customers' needs before, but now focusing on the value proposition and customer segments has been a revelation. He has adopted HubSpot and Xero already as a result.

- Pivots:

    - A pottery studio that normally run experiential workshops, and has launched an online pottery shop with support from the EiR

    - A new start florist who had started to offer workplace arrangements but is now offering a delivery service to keep staff engaged, rewarded, mindful…

- A clothing retailer, who had some online custom but is now able to make better use of time to run it properly, not waste time and spend that time acquiring new customers.

Sheffield Hallam:

- One company, a retail outlet initially, through working with the EiR redefined business to one of purely retail to one of a ‘service’ business. A food business has grown exponentially, pushed to move to delivery and some product innovation. Challenge will be to manage growth in the future.

Sheffield University:

- ‘Company A’ is a very interesting case of a pivot. This a complex social enterprise with multiple income streams. Pre-Covid their main profit-maker was events, but in the height of the lockdown they saw massive spike in demand for their veg-box delivery scheme. They completely pivoted to make this their main business, investing in new facilities and repurposing staff. Such was the demand that they had to start refusing new orders. They are now in the midst of a large investment programme allowing them to scale further.

- One business had used their product (a gas-based additive for internal combinations engines) also had a medical benefit, but this was based on anecdotal evidence as no medical trials had been completed. When I spoke with them, they had just made a prototype of the device for medical use so no impact on the business was clear yet.

Staffordshire:

- Estate agent has been busier than ever with people taking time out during Covid and having life-changing decisions which require a house move. She's very positive and has continued working throughout. Assistance based on virtual viewings, Covid-safe processes for home visits for valuations and viewings. Staff remote working and given iPads to continue with house sales. Business continuity assured.

- Busiest month ever for one cleaning business. We helped them to market themselves to care homes (an area that previously they haven’t dealt with) and he has had the most business ever. Client took a fogging course which introduces near clinical levels of cleanliness.

- Ironing company scaled back to survive and has an app for informing of collections and deliveries speeding up communications - all staff remote working from home - and will scale back up into new premises once critical sectors (hospitality/events) recover, as these provided mainstream revenue.

- Architect with total team remote working - business increase of 60% during the Covid period. Business continuity measures in place due to existing ISO accreditation. Taking this 'live' worked seamlessly. EiR assistance on merging additional Covid measures into existing digital reporting systems.

Q6 - Success stories where the EiR support has been beneficial to the business

Birmingham:

- One business chased and received their £10k Covid grant, purchased equipment and technology to allow live streaming of sewing classes

- Another worked on value proposition of their tutoring and allowed founder to realise new ways of marketing and proving ROI on his solutions

- A further business developed a LinkedIn strategy to engage with schools

Leicester:

- A driving schol have totally transformed their comms and are seeing benefits from that already
- Bicycle business used the coaching to discuss ways to increase resources to meet demand and have acted on that
- Plumbing business has used the coaching to rethink his future direction and comms, and look to change his business model to be more sustainable,
- Events business have used the coaching to really sharpen their products and service offer and communicate it better.
- Some of the others have had a real re-think about how viable their businesses and business models are.

Manchester Metropolitan University:

- Case study. We helped one founder to think how to respond to the lockdown and get creative whilst adding value to potential customers. He had essentially lost all business in lockdown as he couldn't make client videos. We discussed how video as a medium could help to convey a clear message – the question was what message, for whom and to who? As a result the business launched a new initiative supporting the hospitality sector in Manchester. The process has been successful and encouraged the founder to think differently about his marketing and putting together more structured content.

Northumbria University:

- EiR 1: Maybe too early to judge this. However If success can be measured by actions, certainly several client companies all have been inspired to do more, involve more people and work on the actions identified .
- EiR 2: Too early at this stage as still in the formative stages. A direct question to the businesses would answer that question more effectively. And ones I'm still working with have great potential to do more .

Nottingham:

- It's a bit soon to complete these yet for some, but we can work on it.
- We have had some who have been signposted into other projects – including 1 who has attended events on at least 3 different programmes around leadership, sustainability and innovation.

Sheffield University:

- New ways of working; Introduction to tech; Real time information to enable better business decisions; Mentoring and coaching; Trusted advisor et etc
- One business knew that they needed to make better use of IT to manage their data. I helped them understand and articulate their needs . I guided them to prioritise the functions they needed, and focus on what was important in a new system. This exercise resulted in them identifying improved CRM and project management capabilities as the main priority. We had

a look at some systems together and I explained the next steps of their journey - the full process of CRM adoption – from appointing a project leader to testing and comparing different systems, through to involving user groups, making customisations and the need to ensure people were fully trained on the new system

- One organization I've worked with has used Trello to help make production easier with clearly defined steps and appropriate information per job on each card. This means he's got a much better overview of workloads and can be more efficient by knowing all jobs at the same stage of production so can effectively batch process.

Staffordshire:

- Print company needed additional revenue lines and EiR research uncovered a way of generating B2C sales online by looking into how to name a product (face covering) so sales could be made to the public. Currently investigating online gizmo where client logo can be transposed onto a corporate gift/corp clothing item into a mockup prior to ordering online.
- Chauffeur business owner - business just restarting - applied social media strategy to awaken the business - still quiet due to his main sectors music industry and travel remaining in closure - said the webinars and workshops have helped with his wellbeing - the additional learning opportunities, focus and communications have been essential during shutdown and we provided most of that. No revenue boost but an example of how the webinars and support delivered - Business has pivoted to introduce online bookings and diary management. Vehicles have sneeze screens fitted and hand sanitation dispensers.
- Cookery school forced to cease operations during Covid - B2B and B2C customers lost for the interim. Needed to maintain high profile and not lose marketing traction gained over the years. Social media strategy in putting live 'cook-alongs' on Facebook and building audience. Assistance on technical ops - advising on lighting, sound and recording techniques in his home kitchen. Also in suggesting photo and recipe assets be turned into a book to give additional 'pulling power' to future talks and cookery demos - Amazon publish-on-demand looked into as a cost-free option. Audience is building well.

Appendix 4 – Testimony from Businesses

Three examples of what the EiR support meant to individual businesses

The Value of the Leading to Grow Mentoring Programme

In the time that I have been working with my mentor [the EiR], I have totally reignited and transformed my business. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I lost key contracts and as my work involved delivering training and workshops, I was at a loss as to how I would move forward as I could no longer do this. [The contact] in Aston University Business School assured me that he had the perfect mentor for me, and he couldn't have been more accurate.

[The EIR] helped me to see the opportunities in my area of work. From the first minute of our Zoom call, I was offered crucial strategies to help me get back on my feet. As a result, I have revamped a whole range of online well-being and cultural diversity training programmes and added them to our website. I have a new marketing strategy which I am currently implementing that includes using a CRM system (of which I had no previous knowledge) and LinkedIn (which I hardly ever used). Now, I am very confident in using these new digital platforms to gain new business. This is as a result of having these mentoring sessions with [the EIR]. They have been invaluable, and I am extremely pleased that I made the decision to join the Leading to Grow Programme. Thank you.

Unsolicited message to Northumbria University

"[the EiR's] help has been phenomenal. Honestly. Best assessment of our business and its needs I've seen. And in just a short time too. I'm blown away. Thank you so much"

Unsolicited message to EiR with Sheffield Hallam

"Hi [the EiR]

I wanted to say a bit thank you for the help, support and guidance you have given me as part of the LtG coaching.

As you know I was feeling a bit overwhelmed and demotivated by the challenges of marketing my business and the uncertainty of Lockdown. During our sessions together you not only helped me to gain a new sense of motivation and clarity of direction but also enabled me to identify tangible steps to take. I know that the revised architecture and content of my website will put me a far stronger position to attract new clients for my business.

I am very grateful to you for this and only wish we could have had longer to work together.

With very best wishes and many thanks, [recipient]"

Appendix 5 - Personnel

Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS)

Anne Kiem OBE – CABS Chief Exec and Principal Investigator

Barney Roe – Marketing & communications

Roxanne Nazrudeen – Trial manager

Evaluation Consultants

Anthony Moody – ALM Analytics & Consultancy Limited

Mark Hart – Enterprise Research Centre

Business Schools in Consortium

Aston Business School – Mark Hart, Paula Whitehouse, Ibrahim Abbas, Joanna Axinte

Birmingham Business School - Kiran Trehan, David Coleman, Andrew Cruxton

Coventry Business School – Yanguo Jing, David Wick, Gamel Taher

Kingston Business School – Bahare Afrahi, Audley Genus

Leicester Castle Business School (de Montfort University)- David Rae

Newcastle Business School – Nigel Coates, Nicola Burnip

Salford Business School - Francine Morris, Kerry Moores

Sheffield University Management School – Tim Vorley, Beth Patmore, Carole Bains

Staffordshire Business School - Hazel Squire, Kathryn Taylor, Jon Fairburn

Leeds Business School - David Devins

Manchester Metropolitan University Business School - Jennie Shorley

Nottingham Business School - Lynn Oxborrow

Guildhall School of Business & Law – Vanessa Airth

Sheffield Business School – Alexandra Anderson

University of Leicester School of Business – Paul Baines, Matthew Higgins